

THE CYPRUS PLATES AND THE *CHRONICLE OF FREDEGAR*

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NINE silver plates with scenes from the life of David, now divided between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the Museum of Antiquities in Nicosia, were discovered together in Cyprus in 1902. Imperial hallmarks on the back of each of them indicate that, prior to their decoration, the plates were stamped in Constantinople between 613 and 629/30.¹ In a recent article, which I summarize briefly here, I proposed that they formed a unified group with a precise meaning.² When arranged around the largest dish, with its tripartite depiction of the Battle of David and Goliath (1 Sam. 17:41–51), the smaller plates recount in near-perfect chronological order the peripheral episodes of this epic story (see illustration). The narrative begins in the upper left-hand corner and unfolds in a clockwise direction: first, the Summoning of David to the Anointing (1 Sam. 16:12), then the Anointing itself (16:13), the Confrontation with his Brother Eliab (17:28), the Presentation before King Saul (17:31), the Bear Battle (17:34), the Arming of David (17:38), the Lion Battle (17:34), and, lastly, the Marriage of David (18:27). The plates record David's spiritual and physical preparation, the Battle itself, and finally his rewards for victory, both the princess and the money that were promised (17:25).

There are numerous other connections between the plates. The eight smaller silver dishes divide into groups of four that in turn form pairs both in meaning and composition. As arranged in the illustration, the pendant pairs are displayed across from each other; at the same time scenes from the largest plate

relate to adjacent ones. The Confrontation with Goliath in the upper register shares numerous parallels with the Summoning of David and the Confrontation with Eliab, just as does the Beheading of Goliath in the exergue with the animal combats. Among extant Roman and Byzantine silver such a narrative cycle is without precedent; and to illustrate the story, the silversmith used diverse models. His numerous anatomical errors reveal that he had to adjust preexisting scenes to fulfill the narrative and compositional requirements of his commission.

There must have been strong, compelling reasons for the silversmith to have attempted to solve so complex and unparalleled a problem; and it is not unlikely that the commission came from some important member of the court or perhaps from the reigning Emperor Heraclius himself. Found with an enormous treasure of gold jewelry, the plates could only have belonged to an incalculably wealthy individual; and their official silver stamps imply a connection, if not to the Emperor, at least to the imperial mint. As André Grabar recognized, the style and iconography of the scenes reveal that the artist intended to emphasize a parallel between the reign of David and that of the present Emperor;³ and, in fact, imperial ceremonies are depicted on four of the plates as well as such imperial insignia as the palace architecture, nimbus, and *sparsio*. In the Confrontation with Goliath, David even carries a royal scepter.⁴ Only a specific historical event from the life of the Emperor would seem to provide a plausible stimulus for so unique and luxurious a cycle. Moreover, there is one episode from the military career of Heraclius that bears a striking similarity to the story of David and Goliath.

¹ Erica Cruikshank Dodd, *Byzantine Silver Stamps*, DOS, VII (Washington, D. C., 1961), 10, 26, and 34f.

² S. H. Wander, "The Cyprus Plates: The Story of David and Goliath," *Metropolitan Museum Journal*, 8 (1973), 89–104 with bibliography and documentation.

³ *L'empereur dans l'art byzantin* (Paris, 1936), 96f.

⁴ K. Weitzmann, "Prolegomena to a Study of the Cyprus Plates," *MetMus Jour*, 3 (1970), 103.

Byzantine chroniclers record that during his campaign against the Emperor Chosroes in 627, Heraclius fought the Persian general Razatis in single combat, beheading his opponent like the Israelite hero.⁵ George of Pisidia, the court poet, may have even connected this contemporary event with the life of David. In his epic panegyrics on Heraclius' Persian wars, he compared the Emperor to such Old Testament figures as Noah, Moses, and Daniel; unfortunately the verses of his *Heraclias* that, in all likelihood, dealt in detail with the combat are lost.⁶

However persuasive this line of argument might have seemed in my earlier paper, it still lacked any documentary evidence to support a comparison between Heraclius' victory over a Persian general and David's defeat of the Philistine giant. I had hoped that such literary testimony would emerge, but hardly expected that it would come from Merovingian France. In his *Chronicle*, Fredegar, presumably a seventh-century Burgundian Frank, described this battle, identifying Heraclius as a second David:

Following his usual practice, the Persian emperor sent an army against Heraclius. . . . But Heraclius came out to meet them with an army. He sent a mission to Chosroes, the Persian emperor, to require him to do single combat with him. . . . The Persian emperor agreed to this and promised to come and do single combat. Heraclius armed himself, left behind him his army drawn up in fighting array, and advanced to the fray like a second David [italics mine]. But the Persian emperor Chosroes honoured their pact by sending one of his patricians, whose great valour he knew, to fight in his place against Heraclius. . . . The patrician turned his head to see who was following him, whereupon in a flash Heraclius spurred his horse forward, drew his short sword and cut off his

opponent's head. So the Emperor Chosroes was defeated with his Persians, and all in confusion he turned in flight.⁷

Ambassadors returning to the court of King Dagobert in 629 carried this tale across Europe, eventually to reach Fredegar.⁸ And if Fredegar could still thrill with the excitement of this event, how much greater must its renown have been in Constantinople at the time of Heraclius' victory?⁹ Just as George of Pisidia commemorated this battle in verse, some unknown artisan apparently honored its memory in silver. A seventh-century creation without parallel, the Cyprus plates would seem to be the product of an historical moment when the concept of Old Testament kingship and the reality of contemporary governance found uncanny concordance.

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⁷ *The Fourth Book of the Chronicle of Fredegar*, ed. and trans. J. M. Wallace-Hadrill (London, 1960), 52–53. For an appraisal of Fredegar's work, see also *idem*, *The Long-Haired Kings* (New York, 1962), esp. 71–94. Wallace-Hadrill does not refer to the Emperor's battle with Razatis, and considers that, in this particular instance, Fredegar's narrative is not historically founded but is the "account of an imaginary duel between the emperor and the Persian ruler" (*ibid.*, 211). He argues, however, that Fredegar must have been in touch with an eastern Mediterranean tradition, and refers to W. B. Henning's proposition that the Burgundian chronicler's account "may go back to the source of Theophanes" (*ibid.*, 89).

Independently of Fredegar, the *Chronica Muzarabica* records this same battle; but instead of naming Heraclius the new David, it describes his opponent as another Goliath: *sed Cosdro more Philistinorum auctior spurium quendam, tanquam alterum Goliath, educit in prelio. territi omnes Eraclii bellatores pedem subtrahunt retro. tunc Eraclius de domini confidens auxilio super eum descendens uno hostem perimit iaculo* (*Continuatio Hispana a. DCCLIV*, MGH, AA, XI, *Chronica Minora*, II, ed. T. Mommsen [Berlin, 1894], 336). Juan Gil kindly brought to my attention the existence of this text from his recent edition (*Corpus scriptorum Muzarabicorum*, ed. J. Gil, I [Madrid, 1973], 17).

⁸ *Chronicle of Fredegar*, 51.

⁹ For the adoption of the title of *basileus* and the transformation of the imperial dignity that followed Heraclius' defeat of Chosroes, see I. Shahid, "The Iranian Factor in Byzantium during the Reign of Heraclius," *DOP*, 26 (1972), 293–320.

⁵ Nicephorus, *Opuscula historica*, ed. C. de Boor (Leipzig, 1880), 19; Sébéos, *Histoire d'Héraclius*, ed. F. Macler (Paris, 1904), 84; and Theophanes, *Chronographia*, Bonn ed. (1851), 489–92.

⁶ Giorgio di Pisidia, *Poemi, I: Panegirici epici*, ed. and trans. A. Pertusi, StPB, VII (Ettal, 1959), 31.



1. The Cyprus Plates, Arranged according to Relative Sizes